

RAINBOW ROWELL

Exposure eases racial tension

When I first arrived at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I was shocked. It wasn't by the campus' size or its beautiful sculptures. It wasn't the union or the fountain or the friendliness of the people.

Over and over, I asked one question: "Where are all the black people?"

I grew up in what I assume to be Nebraska's blackest area, North Omaha. Walking through the aisles of my junior high and high school, I saw a black face for every white one.

At church, in grocery stores and in restaurants, on the streets and on the sidewalks, I was used to seeing different races.

Suddenly, my whole world was white. Even though I was only 50 miles from home, I felt like I was in a different country. I could count on my hands the number of minorities I saw in a day. After a few months this didn't seem so strange to me anymore. I got used to it.

Since then, I've changed.

For the first time in my life, I am acutely aware of other races. When I talk to someone new who is black, I find myself thinking ever so quickly, "I'm talking to a black person. Am I being appropriate? Do they think I'm prejudiced?"

When I noticed this in myself, I felt kind of sick.

Race relations at my high school weren't perfect. There was racism and hatred and anger, but it never compared to the tension I feel between races at UNL. Here there is a tension so heavy and tangible, you can see it in people's faces and hanging over their conversations.

My high school was integrated. Some white students were bused in from other parts of Omaha to achieve racial balance. I wasn't one of those students, but most of my friends were.



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When I went to school, I didn't see black people. I saw Robyn and Lawrence and Cliff. I saw people with names and personalities. I saw friends and acquaintances.

I understand why the university is a mostly white institution. Nebraska is a mostly white state.

I don't know how tension could be avoided between races at UNL. Most white students don't mean to be insensitive. Most have had few relationships with black people in their lives. There aren't many minorities in towns like Elkhorn or Beaver City. Heck, there aren't many minorities in Millard or West Omaha.

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And what about black students at UNL? If I was surprised by the gleaming white campus, how does it feel for black students who come here? How would it feel to have everyone assume you were an athlete?

How would it feel to be the only black person in the classroom, the one everyone looked at with discomfort or curiosity when the professor discussed minority issues?

Unlike most UNL students, I came from a poor family in a poor neighbor-

hood. But I can pretend I'm just like everyone else. I can blend in. When my political science professor discusses the struggles of the lower class, no one turns to me. My differences aren't evident from the color of my skin.

To some students, the push in recent years to bring multiculturalism to UNL classrooms may seem excessive and reactionary.

Sometimes I wonder how effective these programs will be. Will white students from small Nebraska towns understand black issues just by reading "The Color Purple" or the poetry of Maya Angelou?

If nothing else, perhaps discussing black issues, Hispanic issues and American Indian issues will make talking about these things easier. And maybe after we've talked about them, they won't seem as scary or intimidating, and maybe they'll seem irrelevant. And maybe the campus will be less tense.

And, then again, maybe not.

I don't have any solution to racial problems here on campus or anywhere else. I just know I am grateful I grew up with different kinds of people, and I hope I never have to be in a place where everyone is just like me.

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E. HUGHES SHANKS

All histories have culture ruin

Although I am a 35-year-old graduate student, I don't know much about American history. This puzzles people. They ask me why I haven't spent more time studying it. For me, it's simple. American history is full of painful realities I've tried to avoid.

Some of us are more likely to focus on events in our own country first. A black man, for example, is expected to be preoccupied with the plight of American blacks. But as a black, I'm not obligated to perform that ritual.

As a child I found it so frustrating, I decided to forget about it.

I realize now you can't forget about it. But I tried.

As early as fifth or sixth grade I remember purposely ignoring "American" history. I claimed it was too one-sided for me. What I did know of history made me very angry — so angry, in fact, I thought it was best to not even think about it.

I knew most textbooks contained a pretty good account of history. But true history has several sides. I didn't want just the one side explained in my textbooks. I wanted other sides too.

Perhaps I did this just to be contrary — not unusual for a 10-year-old.

I used to tell my friends, "I'm not studying that. It probably isn't true." Thank God they didn't listen to me.

By high school, I could brag that I had only completed one book. Oh, I had good reasons, some real doozies. My favorites were, "The blacks and the Indians aren't treated fairly," and "The books aren't written by blacks and Indians."

This was probably true. But what was I going to study instead? Unfortunately, refusing to read my textbooks meant I got no side at all. Boy, was that a mistake.

My negative attitude continued through college. I took "American" history only when I had to. Another mistake ... maybe.

Sure, I may not be as well-versed in American history as some of my peers. But by avoiding American history, I have remained objective. And I have been able to study human nature, hu-



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man suffering and human history in other contexts. American history is personal, and if I immersed myself in it, I would be constantly angry.

What began as the knee-jerk response of a 10-year-old became a love for Eastern Europe, Iberia and Latin America, the places I turned to study after rejecting my own country's history. In the process I learned to appreciate life in the United States.

Two of my siblings worked and studied extensively outside of the United States. Both had incredible experiences that fascinated me and encouraged me to learn more about those places.

My sister studied twice in Brazil during high school and college. By age 20, she'd mastered Spanish and Portuguese and survived a military coup, which cut short her last visit.

My older brother was a Russian linguist. He spied on the Soviets and was in the former Czechoslovakia in 1968 when the Russians took over.

Stories about their experiences drew me farther and farther from the United States. Following in their footsteps, I studied the languages and cultures they did. To help me understand these new languages, I developed a strong understanding of English.

I've since read scores of texts, journals, biographies, novels and articles. I've learned that things are tough all over. America isn't so bad.

I'm not forgetting the American Indians or slavery. I'm not forgetting the exploitations of the Chinese or the Mexicans either.

We didn't invent genocide or ex-

ploitation based on race in the United States. We have practiced them though.

We are not the first country to nearly obliterate its indigenous people, but we didn't invent the hypocrisy that attempts to justify it.

But hashing over past and continuing injustices inflicted on our own people gets old.

There is no doubt there is far less oppression and more opportunity here. There is more contentment, more freedom.

Early on I thought I knew what I was doing. But I completed only four books by age 23. "Alive," "Blackfoot Indian Lodge Tales," "The Divine Comedy" and "The Invisible Man."

I met compulsory American history requirements in college with a huge chip on my shoulder. Needless to say, I struggled like hell.

By my college graduation I had become well-versed in 18th-century English literature, Latin American and Eastern European history and politics.

I didn't need to study American history to learn about the pain and prejudice endured by my fellow countrymen and women.

You don't have to go to an American Indian reservation to see the effects of the destruction of a culture. Examples of human anguish and the strife brought about by oppression can be found anywhere in the world.

Pain is colorless. It doesn't matter whose pain you study. What matters is how it happens and what it does to people.

Shanks is a graduate student and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

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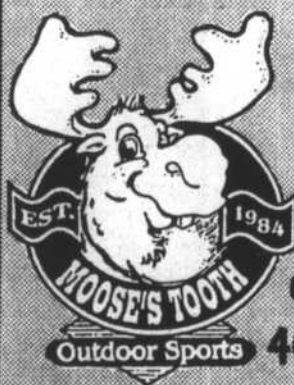
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